DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 299 FL 016 280

AUTHOR Lowe, Pardee, Jr.; Liskin-Gasparro, Judith E.

TITLE Testing Speaking Proficiency: The Oral Interview. An Update. Q&A.

INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 86
CONTRACT 400-86-0019
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Interviews; *Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; *Oral Language; Speech Skills; *Test Format; Test Reliability; *Test Use; Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Proficiency Testing

ABSTRACT

The oral interview (OI) is a testing procedure that measures a wide range of speaking abilities in a foreign language. Although somewhat different versions are used in different testing situations, the OI always consists of a structured, face-to-face conversation on a variety of topics between a student and one or two testers. The resulting speech sample is rated on a scale whose specific range is determined by the testing agency. The OI was developed by the Foreign Service Institute and has been refined continuously by the Interagency Language Roundtable. The proficiency scale and interview have attracted increased interest in academic circles, both for testing and as an organizing principle for developing curriculum. They have demonstrated a high degree of reliability and validity, and the OI is appropriate when proficiency testing is warranted or desired, as for placement testing, before and after intensive language training, before and after living abroad, at the end of a major sequence of high school or college courses, for course equivalency, for teacher certification, and for assessing language program effectiveness. Formal tester training and certification are available through professional associations, and individuals can also have their own proficiency tested by contacting certified testers through the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED276299

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages and Linguistics

Q & A

TESTING SPEAKING PROFICIENCY: THE ORAL INTERVIEW

Prepared by Pardee Lowe, Jr.
Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro

October, 1986

Center for Applied Linguistics
1118 22nd Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C.R. Tucker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FL 016 280

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Testing Speaking Proficiency: The Oral Interview

Prepared by Pardee Lowe, Jr. and Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro ***October, 1986***

The United States is confronted by a paradox: teaching students to speak a second language has been a goal of the second language teaching profession for over three decades; yet, as a nation, we are falling behind in our ability to speak languages other than English for such important purposes as trade, travel, and diplomacy. Although three of the four language skills--listening, reading, and writing--appear to be taught and tested in the second language classroom to the satisfaction of teachers and students, such is not the case with speaking. While much excellent teaching may be taking place, there is a substantial need for a readily available and effective means to measure second language speaking proficiency with the same degree of accuracy and validity that is possible for the three other skills. The oral proficiency interview described here may provide such a means.

What Is the Oral Interview?

The oral interview (OI) is a testing procedure that measures a wide range of speaking abilities in a foreign or second language. Although somewhat different versions of the interview and the rating scale are used by U.S. government and academic testers, the OI always consists of a structured, face-to-face conversation on a variety of topics between a student and one or two trained testers. Depending on the student's level of proficiency, the OI lasts from 10 to 40 minutes. The resulting speech sample (which is usually recorded for later verification) is rated in government agencies on a scale ranging from 0 (no practical ability to function in the language) to 5 (ability indistinguishable from that of a well-educated native speaker). The scale used in academia ranges from 0 (no knowledge of the language whatsoever) to Superior (adult professional proficiency), and uses verbal descriptors (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior) that correspond to the government proficiency levels 0-3. "Plus" ratings (0+, 1+, 2+, up to 4+), which are expressed as Novice High, Intermediate High, and Advanced Plus in the academic scale, are given to students who substantially surpass the requirements for a given level but fail to sustain performance at the next higher level. In addition, the academic scale provides for ratings of "Low" and "Mid" at the Novice and Intermediate levels to recognize weaker and stronger performances.

Each range of the proficiency scale (besides absolute 0 at the bottom and native ability at the top) is defined in terms of functional language use. For example, the Advanced level description in the academic scale reads as follows:

Able to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, complaining, and apologizing. Can narrate and describe with some details, linking sentences together smoothly. Can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest, using general vocabulary. Shortcomings can often be smoothed over by communicative strategies, such as pause fillers, stalling devices, and different rates of speech. Circumlocution which arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations very often is quite successful, though some groping for words may still be evident. The Advanced-level speaker can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors.

This description, like those for the other levels, illustrates the extent to which the OI is based on real-life linguistic needs and behaviors. The descriptions also underscore the fact that the OI is a *proficiency* test, which compares the student's speaking ability with that of a well-educated native speaker using the language for real-life communicative purposes, as contrasted to an *achievement* test, which is based on material covered in a particular course of study.

How Was the OI Developed?

In the 1950s, the U.S. Department of State identified the need to verify the foreign language skills of its employees. A needs analysis of State Department jobs at home and abroad, carried out by the Foreign Service Institute, resulted in the development of a series of statements of oral language proficiency and a face-to-face interview test procedure. The interviewing and rating system was officially adopted by other federal agencies concerned with second-language training and use, and has been used since that time to test the oral proficiency of current and prospective government employees. The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), a consortium of government agencies involved in the teaching and testing of language proficiency, has continued to refine and expand the proficiency descriptions and to provide even better guidelines for conducting the interview.

Center for Applied Linguistics
1118 22nd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

In the late 1960s, the Peace Corps turned to the Educational Testing Service (ETS) for help in developing a program to test the oral proficiency of its trainees and volunteers. ETS' role was to develop training materials and to train testers at a number of in-country Peace Corps sites. In the 1970s, interest in and use of the OI expanded to include bilingual and ESL teacher certification in several states; ETS trained interviewers and raters and, in some places, also developed and operated testing programs.

In the 1980s, the proficiency scale and the interview have attracted increasing interest within academic circles, both as a testing procedure and as an organizing principle for designing curriculum and instructional activities. With the support of several grants from the U.S. Department of Education and with assistance from the ILR, ETS and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) adapted the proficiency scale for academic use by developing additional level descriptions between levels 0 and 2, and by renaming the levels as described earlier.

How Does the OI Rate as a Test?

The OI has demonstrated a high degree of reliability and validity. It is reliable in that trained testers who independently rate the same live or taped interview normally assign the same rating or differ by only a "plus" point. The OI is a face-valid test of speaking ability in that it requires candidates to speak in a realistic conversational setting. The content validity of the OI is maintained from interview to interview by having trained interviewers always test for the functions, contexts, and accuracy that characterize each level.

Practicality is a crucial issue in all testing. Paper-and-pencil tests are highly practical because they can be given to large numbers of students simultaneously and can be scored quickly and accurately by nonspecialists. Unfortunately, they cannot directly measure speaking proficiency. By contrast, the OI requires one or two trained testers and is both more labor-intensive and more time-consuming than paper-and-pencil tests. However, the importance of oral competence fully justifies the time and effort required to test it.

When Can the OI Be Used?

The OI is appropriate when proficiency testing is warranted or desired (as for placement testing); testing before and after intensive language training; testing before and after living abroad; testing at the end of a major sequence of high school or college courses; testing for course credits awarded for proven proficiency rather than for number of credit hours taken; testing for suitable language ability for certification of teachers and graduate teaching assistants. It can also be justifiably used by teachers and curriculum specialists to assess the effectiveness of their programs in developing students' oral proficiency.

How Does One Receive Training in Oral Proficiency Assessment?

Since 1982, individuals interested in learning about the OI or in being trained to assess the oral proficiency of secondary and postsecondary students have had a variety of workshops open to them, from relatively short familiarization sessions to four-day formal training workshops. Familiarization sessions, which range from two-hour presentations to full-day workshops, introduce participants to the concepts and procedures involved in oral proficiency assessment. Depending on the length of the session, participants listen to and rate taped interviews, and may also have the opportunity to conduct practice interviews. ACTFL-certified oral proficiency testers who have received additional instruction in tester training are available to conduct such familiarization sessions, which can be tailored to meet the particular needs of the audience. See the "Resources" section for further information.

Formal tester training, held under the auspices of ACTFL, ETS, and some ILR agencies, begins with an intensive four-day workshop and is completed by correspondence as participants conduct practice interviews over a period of several months. Individuals whose interviewing and rating skills meet established criteria are then certified as oral proficiency testers by ACTFL.

Can I Have My Oral Proficiency Tested?

Individuals who wish to have their oral proficiency tested can do so by contacting a certified tester directly. (An upated list of certified testers is maintained by ACTFL.) The tester records the interview and sends the tape and the rating to ACTFL. ACTFL sends the taped interview to a second tester for an independent evaluation, and then forwards to the individual a document with his or her oral proficiency level. For information on the service, contact ACTFL. An oral proficiency rating determined in this way is recognized throughout the United States and can be used for official purposes, such as applications for employment or to academic programs.

Resources

The following individuals may be contacted for further information on:

A= proficiency level descriptions
B= familiarization workshops on interview scale and interviewing procedure
C= formal tester-training workshops
D= advanced tester-training/research-oriented workshops

David V. Hiple (A,B,C)
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
579 Broadway
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706

Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro (A,B)
Educational Testing Service 18-E
Princeton, NJ 08541

Pardee Lowe Jr. (A,D)
500 Roosevelt Blvd. #317
Falls Church, VA 22044

John L.D. Clark (D)
Defense Language Institute
Foreign Language Center
ATFL-DES
Presidio of Monterey
Monterey, CA 93944-5000

References

Note: These references provide general information on the oral proficiency interview, but do not substitute for the hands-on training required to administer and rate interviews in a valid and reliable manner.

Bachman, L.F., & Palmer, A.S. (1981). The construct validation of the FSI oral interview. *Language Learning (31)*, 67-86.

Carroll, J.B. et al. (1967). *The foreign language attainments of language majors in the senior year: a survey conducted in U.S. colleges and universities*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 013 343)

Clark, J.L.D. (Ed.). (1978). *Direct testing of speaking proficiency: theory and application*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 172 523)

Frith, J.R. (Ed.). (1980). *Measuring spoken language proficiency*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Herzog, M., & Erickson, C. (1982). *The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center proficiency skill descriptions: an overview* (videocassette). Monterey, CA: Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center.

Higgs, T.V. (1985). Teaching grammar for proficiency. *Foreign Language Annals (18)*, 289-96.

James, C.J. (Ed.). (1982). *Foreign language proficiency in the classroom and beyond*. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. Ed 253 104)

Liskin-Gasparro, J.E. (1984). Gateway to testing and curriculum. *Foreign Language Annals (17)*, 475-89.

Liskin-Gasparro, J.E. (1982). The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: a historical perspective. In Theodore V. Higgs (Ed.), *Teaching for proficiency, the organizing principle*. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 238 264)

Lowe, P., Jr. (1985). *The ILR handbook on oral interview testing*. Washington, DC: Government Language School.

Lowe, P., Jr. (1983). The ILR oral interview: origins, applications, pitfalls, and implications. *Die Unterrichtspraxis (16)*, 230-44.

Omaggio, A. (Ed.). (1985). Proficiency, curriculum, articulation: the ties that bind. *Proceedings of the Northeast Conference*. Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference.

Palmer, A.S., Groot, P.J.M., & Trosper, G.A. (Eds.). (1981). *The construct validation of tests of communicative competence*. Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

OERI
Office of Educational
Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0019. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.